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CATHERINE AND PUGACHEV

Eighteenth century Russian rulers:

Catherine I : 1725-1727
 Peter II : 1717-1730
 Anna : 1730-1740
 Ivan VI : 1740-1741
 Elizabeth I : 1741-1762
 Catherine II : 1762-1796

Territorial Expansion and Colonization

Like Peter the Great, Catherine was an aggressive expander of Russian territory. She began her reign by turning Courland into a Russian protectorate in 1763. She used a combination of threat and intimidation to accomplish this. In the end she sent in Russian troops to occupy the territory. In Poland she installed her favorite Poniatowski (1763-1768) to make sure Poland remained under Russian control. The Crimea was next on her list.

The conquest of the Crimea (1768-1772) was undoubtedly her earliest great achievement. It was a protracted war and not an easy thing to do. There was provocation. The French has been vigorously promoting anti-Russian feeling at the court of Constantinople. The Cossacks, always a provocative element, had been pillaging Turkish territory in southern Russia. Gregory Orlov, another one of Catherine's favorites, had been engaged in a long-range project which envisaged the stimulation of revolts by Slavs and Greeks in the Balkans. Catherine and Orlov wanted to create independent states in the Crimea, in Moldavia and in Wallachia. The aim was to push the Turks completely out of Europe. In the process, perhaps even the Caucasus could be annexed to Russia. Finally, the Turks arrested the Russian envoy in Constantinople and war broke out in 1768.

The Russian fleet, commanded by Admiral Spiridov, sailed in 1769, and annihilated the Turkish fleet in 1770 at Scio. This battle was compared with the battle of Lepanto but it had little real significance. The Crimean Tartars meanwhile invaded the south of Russia and the Russian armies pushed toward the Danube in the Balkans. General Pain captured Bender in 1771. General Vasili Dolgoruky conquered the Crimea. The great powers now got nervous and an armistice was signed in 1772 with the understanding that a solution to the problem would be found in the partition of Poland.

The so-called First Polish Partition had been under discussion for some time. When Russia surrendered her claims to the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, a deal was made compensate Russia with a slice of Poland. The Treaty of 1772 finalized the partition. Poniatowski was completely ignored. The Polish diet was coerced and bribed to go along with the dismemberment. Poland lost one third of its territory and one third of its population. Russia got the ancient territories of Kievan Russia and Muscovy: about 36,000 squares miles and 1.8 million people. Most of these people were ethnic Russians and Greek Orthodox in their religion.

Meanwhile something had to be done to turn the armistice with Turkey into a treaty arrangement. There was a royal coup in Sweden which threatened Russia and forced her to withdraw her troops from the principalities. But negotiations with Turkey were extremely rocky, in part because the sultan died and brought some uncertainty with regard to Turkish policy. So the Russians resumed military operations, but Catherine was eager to reach an agreement to consolidate her gains thus far. So the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi was signed in 1774.

The Crimea was declared to be independent. Russia annexed Kerch and Enikale, as well as the territory between the Bug and the Dnieper, part of the Kuban and Terek. Azov and Taganrog were fortified. The Black Sea became free for international navigation and the straits were opened up to all nations. On top of these massive losses, Turkey was compelled to pay an indemnity of 4.5 million rubles. Turkey held on the principalities, however. In terms of future problems in the Balkans, the most important provision was the one which gave Russia the right to protect the interests of Christians in Turkish territory.

But it was only a matter of time before Russia and Turkey went at it again. In 1781 Russia and Austria signed a secret alliance to make trouble for the Turks by somehow detaching Greece from her hold. That never happened but other things did. Since there were internal feuds in the newly independent Crimea, Catherine decided to annex the Crimea to Russia outright. There were also clashes between Russian and Turkish troops in the principalities, in the Caucasus and in Georgia. Finally, Catherine made a grand and provocative tour down the Dnieper in 1787. War with Turkey broke out soon thereafter and Austria joined Russia against Turkey in 1788. Sweden also decided in that year to attack Russia and her fleet did some damage to the Russians, but that was all. The Treaty of Verelia (1790) returned to the status quo ante bellum and an alliance with Russia.

Meanwhile everyone was concerned about the events of the French Revolution, which left Russia alone to face the Turks in the East. Catherine ignored threats from Britain and Prussia and soundly defeated the Turks on land and sea. The Treaty of Jassy (1792) got Russia some more territory between the Bug and Dniestre, but essentially merely confirmed the settlement of Kuchuk-Kainardzhi.

This brings us to Catherine's final expansionist move, the Second and Third Polish Partition. Poland had been left in relative peace between 1774 and 1787. In fact, Catherine's man, Stanislas Poniatowski even was able to embark on some important reforms. But in 1788 there was an anti-Russian revolt in Poland and two years later the Poles struck an alliance with Prussia in the hope of keeping Russia at bay. A new constitution was introduced in 1791 which finally abolished the debilitating liberum veto, the so-called "confederations" and the election to the throne. The liberum veto made it almost impossible to conduct political business since a unanimous vote in the Sejm was required to pass any law. The confederations were armed associations of certain political factions which used force to get their private aims accomplished. The provision of royal election prevented the establishment of a stable monarchy.

Nevertheless, a "confederation" of 1792 called for aid from Catherine to support them and she decided to send in 100,000 Russian troops. This led to the so-called Second Partition in 1793 with Austria and Russia both taking chunks of territory. Russia got 89,000 square miles and 3 million people. Altogether Poland lost 54% of her territory and population. While Austria and Russia agreed to fight the spirit of revolutionary insurrection, Russia was the one which used arms to enforce the treaty. When a Polish patriot by the name of Kosciuszko leads an uprising against the Russians in 1794, Catherine sends her great general Suvorov to occupy Warsaw.

The following year all three of Poland's neighbors, Austria, Prussia and Russia carved up what was left of Poland in the so-called Third Partition (1795). So the fate Catherine had planned for Turkey befell Poland instead. An independent nation was wiped off the map. Catherine's legacy is indeed impressive in terms of sheer size. She added some 200,000 square miles to Russian territory. She expanded Mother Russia to the Baltic Sea in the north and the shores of the Black Sea in the south. Russia's population almost doubled, expanding from 19 million to 36 million. But this expanded empire also brought some problems since it introduced Poles and Turks into the body politic. Both ethnic groups gave Russia serious headaches for years to come. This huge new Russian empire remained largely unexploited. This automatically led to the colonization policy.

Catherine continued and expanded the colonization policy of Elizabeth. The latter empress had created the new Serbia between the Dnieper and the Bug, organized largely along military lines. Montenegrins settled in large numbers around Orenburg. While both Austria and Turkey resisted colonization in Russia, in 1762 this policy became intense. Russia now welcomed everybody except Jews. In the following year Catherine established the Office of Foreign Settlement under Gregory Orlov.

This new bureau promised potential settlers freedom of worship, no taxation and self government in virtually autonomous settlement areas. But the largest enticement was the promise of free land distribution to qualified settlers, those who were willing to work hard in developing virgin lands recently conquered from Turkey and Poland. Most of the new settlers came from Germany where land was scarce and religious persecution intense. It should also be mentioned that the government took over the administration of the colonies in 1779. By 1768 some 104 colonies had been established on the Volga River. By the time of World War II a total of 23,000 foreign settlements existed in Russia. Most of these colonies retained their native language, religion and customs until the time of the Revolution.

Catherine's "Enlightenment" – Pro and Con

There are a variety of opinions about Catherine's supposed enlightenment. The question is whether or not we can call her an enlightened despot like Joseph II of Austria and Frederick the Great of Prussia. Professor Michael Petrovich, my teacher at the University of Wisconsin, believed that the tragic contradiction of enlightened despotism was especially true in the case of Russia with its dichotomy of Rus and Rossia. Catherine in this respect suffered from the fact that Russia was a second class country when compared with Western Europe. Her famous Nakaz of 1766 was full of meaningless clichés. It was merely a confession of faith, not a program with practical elements. It was essentially copied from the ideas of Montesquieu. In fact, emancipation was literally impossible in the Russia of the eighteenth century when literacy amounted to a mere 2% of the total population.

Professor Michael Florinsky of Harvard takes Catherine's enlightenment a little more seriously. He thinks Catherine befriended Voltaire largely to build up her own reputation. She purchased Diderot's library and kept him as librarian at the 1000 livres per annum. This was the basis of her reputation as a patron of Enlightenment. Other French philosophes were even critical of her policies. D'Alembert refused to come to Russia and after the annexation of the Crimea in 1783 he became a severe critic of Catherine. She did conduct a lively correspondence with enlightenment men abroad and followed intellectual and literary movements in western countries. She began a satirical journal, "This and That," the first such effort in Russia. She even wrote plays in French and Russian. She also tried her hand at polemics, librettos and pedagogical treatments. She wrote "Notes on Russian History," and her own Memoirs, which ran to some 12 volumes. While all of this was impressive, in the end it did little more than enhance her reputation as an educated ruler.

Catherine's famous Instructions of 1767 to the Legislative Commission which was to come up with major reforms reveals the nature of her enlightenment. Most of the ideas contained in the Instructions were lifted from Montesquieu and Beccaria and were subsequently censored by her conservative advisors who found them dangerous. Much Catherine's liberalism was undermined by the eventual failure of the Legislative Commission on account of the Turkish war and the Pugachev rebellion.

The liberal Swiss teacher Le Harpe was the only one to stay in Russia and later have some impact on Catherine's successors like Alexander I. What was contained in the Instructions were maxims not expressions of deep conviction. She had a strong belief in the miracle-working power of liberal and radical formulas. Her problem was that much of this formula gathering was done merely to get publicity. There was rather ostentatious patronage of the arts, of the sciences and of thinkers. Yet the security police was revived under Catherine and the liberal publisher Novikov was persecuted. She would not tolerate any competition when it came to promoting "freethinking."

Alexander Herzen, the Russian revolutionary living in exile, said that Russia under Catherine was a cold, rigid camp. Catherine, he believed, promoted the state for its own sake and completely forgot about the common people.

Pugachev's Rebellion

"Social antagonisms which simmered in the Legislative Commission exploded in the Pugachev rebellion. That great uprising followed the pattern of earlier lower class insurrections, such as the ones led by Bolotnikov, Razin, and Bulavin, which strove to destroy the established order. A simple Don cossack, a veteran of several wars and a deserter, Emelian Pugachev capitalized on the grievances of the Ural cossacks to lead them in revolt against the authorities in the autumn of 1773. Before long the movement spread up and down the Ural river and also westward to the Volga basin. At its height the rebellion encompassed a huge territory in eastern European Russia, engulfing such important cities as Kazan and posing a threat to Moscow itself.

Pugachev profited from the fact that Russia was engaged at the time in a major war against Turkey, that few troops were stationed in the eastern part of the country, and that many local officials, as well as, to some extent, the central government itself, panicked when they belatedly realized the immediacy and extent of the danger. Yet his most important advantages stemmed from the nature and the injustice of the Russian social system. The local uprising of the Ural cossacks became a mass rebellion. Crowds of serfs, workers in the Ural mines and factories, Old Believers, Bashkirs, Tartars, and certain other minority peoples, joined Pugachev's original cossack following. Indeed, some specialists believe that Pugachev should have shown more daring and marched directly on Moscow in the heart of the serf area. As Pushkin's "A Captain's Daughter" illustrates, few, except officials, officers, and landlords, tried to stem the tide.

Pugachev acted in the grand manner. He proclaimed himself Emperor Peter III, alleging that he had fortunately escaped the plot of his wife Catherine; and he established a kind of imperial court in imitation of the one in St. Petersburg. He announced the extermination of officials and landlords, and freedom from serfdom, taxation, and military service for the people. Pugachev and his followers organized an active chancellery and engaged in systematic propaganda. Also, the leaders of the rebellion arranged elections for a new administration in the territory that they held, and they tried to form a semblance of a regular army with a central staff and an artillery, for which Ural metal workers supplied some of the guns.

Although the extent and organization of the Pugachev uprising deservedly attract attention, it still suffered from the usual defects of such movements: a lack of preparation, coordination, and leadership. Small army detachments, when well commanded, could defeat peasant hordes. After government victories and severe reprisals, the raging sea of rebellion would vanish almost as rapidly as it had appeared. In late 1774, following the defeat of his troops and his escape back to the Ural area, Pugachev was handed over by his own men to the government forces. He was brought to Moscow, tried, and executed in an especially cruel manner. The great uprising had run its course.

The Pugachev rebellion served to point out again, forcefully and tragically, the chasm between French philosophy and Russian reality. Catherine the Great had in any case allied herself with the gentry from the time of the palace coup which gave her the throne, and it is highly doubtful that she had ever seriously intended to act against any essential interests of the landlords. The sharp division of her reign into the early liberal years and a later period of conservatism and reaction appears none too convincing.

Still, the enormous shock of the revolt, following the milder one of the collapse of the work of the Legislative Commission because of social antagonisms, made the alliance between the crown and the gentry very close, explicit, and even militant. In the conditions of eighteenth-century Russia and as a logical result of the policies followed by the Russian government, the two had to sink or swim together. Yet Catherine the Great was too intelligent to become simply a reactionary. She intended instead to combine oppression and coercion with a measure of reform and a great deal of propaganda." [Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 260-1].

Send comments and questions to [Professor Gerhard Rempel](mailto:gerhard.rempel@wnec.edu), Western New England College.